DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 310 710 HE 022 851

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TITLE Proposal Development Handbook.
INSTITUTION American Association of State Colleges and Universities, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Oct 87
NOTE 10p.
AVAILABLE FROM American Association of State Colleges and Universities, One Dupont Circle, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20036 ($4.75).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Finance; Financial Support; Government Role; *Grants; Grantsmanship; Guides; Higher Education; *Philanthropic Foundations; Program Proposals; *Proposal Writing

ABSTRACT

A handbook explaining the conditions under which government agencies and foundations make grants is presented, outlining a process for organizing such efforts to obtain support. The rationale for grant making is discussed. Steps in proposal development are: putting the idea into a project format by developing a project outline (statement of need or problem to be addressed, goals and objectives, plan of action, project design, or methodology, budget and personnel requirements, and title) and reassessing one's position; identifying potential sponsors; ascertaining sponsor interest (noting program purpose, stated program priorities, recipient eligibility requirements, type of activities eligible for funding, particular funding mechanism used, level of competition, availability of application forms or proposal guidelines, application deadlines and review cycles, and giving history); and preparing a full proposal (narrative, evaluation, budget, abstract, and appendices). Four helpful suggestions are: be creative in examining the applications of one's work; become thoroughly familiar with the agencies that are apt to support the work; review other work supported by potential sponsors; and explore the possibility of establishing relationships other than that of grantor-grantee. A bibliography offers information under the headings of announcements of government grant and contract opportunities, resources for identifying potential sponsors, and proposal development. (SM)

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Proposal Development Handbook

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Contents

Introduction 1

The Rationale for Grant Making
Steps in Proposal Development

Putting Your Idea in a Project Format 2

Developing a Project Outline
Reassessing Your Position

Identifying Potential Sponsors 4

Ascertaining Sponsor Interest 5

Preparing a Full Proposal 6

Elements of a Full Proposal
General Considerations
Final Thoughts

Bibliography 11

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Proposal Development Handbook

Introduction

The ability to secure external funding has become a necessary skill for many academic careers. This booklet explains the conditions under which government agencies and foundations make grants and outlines a process for organizing your efforts to obtain this support.

The Rationale for Grant Making

Government agencies and private foundations have long recognized the value of using academic talent to assist them in meeting their goals. Grants from both sources have supported a wide variety of activities aimed at goals as diverse as expanding scientific knowledge, promoting social equality, and fostering economic development. Although it sometimes appears that virtually any activity can be supported, in fact, sponsors fund projects that fit within specified limitations.

Government agencies disburse tax dollars to meet public needs that have been recognized by Congress or state legislatures. In many cases, the authority to spend is very broad, but in all cases, an agency can fund only activities that fit within its authority. Each agency also wishes to support worthwhile projects, so as to ensure continued appropriations from the legislature.

Foundation grant making may appear more idiosyncratic, but it is not without its own inherent logic. While foundations do have much greater discretion in disbursing their funds, they must operate within the boundaries established by the Internal Revenue Service to maintain their tax-exempt status. They have demonstrated a strong concern for public approval and a sincere wish to see their money well spent. Both types of funding sources want to fund projects that hold promise of making a contribution in the area(s) for which they feel responsibility. Consequently, whether you are applying to a govern-

ment program or a foundation, it is important to propose a clearly thought-out project with measurable outcomes in an area of identified need.

Steps in Proposal Development

The activities involved in the development of a proposal fall into the following sequence:

- putting an idea into a project format;
- identifying potential sponsors;
- ascertaining sponsor interest; and
- preparing a full proposal.

Each of these is explained briefly below, but more detailed discussions can be found in the publications listed in the bibliography.

Putting Your Idea in a Project Format

Sponsors fund activities, not ideas. No matter how good your ideas or noble your intentions, you must translate them into a specific set of activities in order to get funding. Potential sponsors must know what you actually plan to do in order to determine whether investing in your project represents an effective use of their resources. Whether you want to set up a training program, demonstrate a novel approach to service delivery, or conduct basic research, the task of moving from an idea to a practical work plan is the same. You must define the problem or need you wish to address, formulate goals and objectives for your response to that problem, and then decide what specific actions have to be undertaken to fulfill those goals and objectives.

A good way to do this is to develop a concise outline containing each of the elements listed below. As you do so, keep working on each section until you have established a strong, logical connection between the activities you propose to undertake and the resolution of the problem you have defined. Developing the outline should allow you not only to organize your thoughts into a coherent plan of action, but also to muster the arguments you will need to persuade a potential sponsor of the value of your proposed activities. As you work on each section, try to look at the project from the perspective of a potential donor. Why would someone support this activity? Who might benefit from it, or what might be accomplished as a result of this project?

Developing a Project Outline

Statement of Need or Problem to be Addressed: What really needs to be done? What significant need(s) are you trying to meet? What services need to be delivered to whom, or what gaps exist in the knowledge base of your field? Thinking critically about these questions will allow you to "carve out" a work space for yourself by defining the problem you want to address. Remember the problem must be both significant and manageable. Potential sponsors must be convinced not only that a problem is important enough to deserve attention but also that some impact on the problem is possible.

Goals and Objectives: Set out an overall goal for your project by delineating what you actually intend to accomplish. Think about what impact you hope to make on the problem. What caused the problem, or what factors contribute to it, and how can these factors be modified to alleviate the problem? What specific *measurable* changes could be made? Your answer will allow you to develop a set of project objectives—i.e., a statement of precise outcomes that can be measured to determine actual accomplishments.

Plan of Action, Project Design, or Methodology: What specific activities would enable you to meet the objectives you have set? How can they be conducted? For a research proposal, you must select an appropriate methodology and then establish a clear rationale for its adoption. For a service or demonstration project, think about the number and types of people who would be served and who would provide the specific service components.

Budget and Personnel Requirements: Estimate the personnel requirements of the project. How many people with what types of qualifications would be needed to carry out the project? What space, equipment, and travel resources would they need? How much time is necessary to complete the project activities? Once you have answered these questions, you should be able to assess the dollar value of each of the

items mentioned to get a fairly accurate estimate of the financial requirement of the project.

Title: When you have finished outlining the project, choose a simple title that explains (to the extent possible) what you plan to do. There is no need for cute or catchy titles or fancy acronyms. If potential sponsors find your title silly, it may prejudice them against the project.

After you have thought out each of these elements, review what you have prepared in order to be sure that the overall plan is logical and consistent. It should now be relatively easy to write a brief outline of the project, which can be used as the basis for the next step in the development of a proposal. The outline should include:

- title of the proposed project;
- statement of need or problem to be addressed;
- plan of action, project design, or methodology; and
- budget and personnel requirements.

Reassessing Your Position

Before you proceed (or begin) to identify potential sponsors, take time for two additional steps. First, conduct a thorough bibliographic search, not only to avoid duplication of existing studies or activities, but also to uncover information that may strengthen your proposal. Second, evaluate your qualifications in relation to the requirements of the project. Be realistic in assessing whether you have the necessary experience, interest, and ability not only to carry out the project but also to *compete* for funding. It is equally important to assess how the project fits with your institution's mission, size, and resources. Grants are generally made to institutions, not individuals; in many cases, sponsors require evidence of institutional commitment before they will consider supporting a project, however impressive an individual's proposal may be.

Identifying Potential Sponsors

Having defined your project plan and estimated the financial resources needed, you should next identify particular sponsors who might have an interest in your work. Although it is possible to do this on your own, you can usually obtain assistance from the campus office designated to coordinate externally sponsored programs and research. (If you do not have access to these offices, a reference librarian at any larger library can generally provide assistance in locating this information. The bibliography located in the back of this publication lists many of the basic reference works in this area.) The information professionals in that office can help you match your interests with those of potential sponsors in terms of subject area, level of financial support (i.e., size of award), and specific eligibility requirements. In many cases, these professionals will already be familiar with sponsors whose programs are appropriate to your needs; in other cases, they can provide assistance in using funding guides, such as the *Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance* (CFDA) or the *Foundation Directory*, to identify potential sponsors. They can also help you determine the appropriateness of a given program in light of eligibility criteria and funding limitations and can provide (or assist you in obtaining) additional information on those programs deemed appropriate.

Ascertaining Sponsor Interest

Once you have identified potential sponsors, it is important to obtain as much information as possible in order to ascertain their likely interest in your project. The information needed can usually be found in printed materials readily available to the public, since government agencies are subject to strong reporting requirements, and foundations are required by law to make information on their giving practices available to the Internal Revenue Service and the public. Pay particular attention to the following factors:

- the purpose of the program;
- stated program priorities;
- recipient eligibility requirements (including geographic restrictions);
- types of activities eligible for funding;
- particular funding mechanism utilized (grant, contract, etc.);

- level of competition (total funds available and, where known, projected number of awards and range);
- availability of application forms or specific proposal guidelines;
- application deadlines and review cycles (i.e., length of time between receipt of application and award of grant);
- giving history (types of organizations and activities funded in the past).

If the information you have obtained leads you to think that a program is relevant, it is, in most cases, appropriate and advisable to contact agency staff to verify the accuracy of your reading of their materials and to ascertain the current status of the program (funding levels, deadlines for applications, any change in program priorities). The campus sponsored programs office can help you use agency directories and other materials to locate the appropriate contact person.

Contact with a potential sponsor can be made by a telephone conversation, a written inquiry describing your project, an office visit, or a combination of these approaches. The method of contact you choose should depend on the sponsor's preference, if indicated, and your own style. If a letter of intent is submitted, it should be concise, usually no more than one or two pages, but should include all the information contained in your outline.

You should not expect a commitment for funding at this point, but you should be able to obtain an indication of the relevance of your work to the sponsor's current interests. The sponsor's reaction to your preliminary inquiry will allow you to assess whether it is worth your time and effort to proceed with the development of a full proposal.

Preparing a Full Proposal

There is no secret formula guaranteed to produce a perfect proposal. You can prepare a more effective document, however, if you keep certain general principles in mind. First, the proposal document is the primary basis for evaluating your project and for determining whether financial support is justified. You must be sure it not only represents the need for action, but also includes all the information needed to evaluate accurately the proposed activity and your ability to conduct it. Second, your document is likely to be read by people facing time constraints. Reviewers often read large numbers of similar proposals in a relatively short meeting. Yours must be well-organized and concise in order to make your point and stand out in the crowd.

Elements of a Full Proposal

The format or presentation of a particular proposal document will depend on the requirements of the sponsor to whom you are applying: most government agencies have application forms or very specific proposal guidelines, while other sponsors are often less directive. There are, however, certain elements that *all* proposals should contain. These are outlined briefly below, but more detailed discussions of each can be found in some of the reference works listed in the bibliography.

Narrative: The main body of the proposal should be a narrative laying out exactly what you plan to do and why. It should include all of the elements in your outline, with supporting information and elaboration. Generally, you begin with a statement of the need or problem you will address. It is important that you make no unsupported assumptions. For service projects, you should document the need through a needs assessment. In the case of research projects, you should provide a rationale for why work in your particular area is likely to be fruitful. Next, state the overall goals and specific objectives of the project, making sure there is a clear, logical connection between the problem you have defined and the response you are proposing. Finally, describe your plan of action or methodology, providing sufficient detail for the reader to judge whether your project can be run both efficiently and effectively. The narrative should demonstrate that you have carefully thought out all aspects of the project. It must convince the reviewer of the significance of the problem, the appropriateness of your proposed response, and your ability to conduct the proposed activities. Be sure its logic is cogent and its organization strong.

Evaluation: Effective program evaluation has become more crucial as the funding available for research and social action programs has diminished in real dollar terms. Increasingly effective evaluation methodologies have evolved in recent years, and most sponsors recognize that the incorporation of an evaluation component in project management plans leads to more effective project operations as well as better results (project outcomes). Many sponsors will specifically request a separate description of your planned evaluation process. In other cases, you should be sure to address this element in the narrative or as a separate section of the proposal. Many publications on evaluation are available to help you select the most appropriate methodology for your particular project. (See bibliography at the end of this publication.)

Budget: Although too often viewed as a tedious technicality of interest only to accountants, the budget, in fact, is a key element of any proposal. It outlines your project in fiscal terms and is often used by reviewers to get a quick sense of how the project would be organized. The major budget item frequently is salaries. This should be broken down to indicate the number of professional and support staff, their salary levels, and the percentages of time to be spent on the project. Other typical budget items include office supplies, travel, equipment, and institutional overhead. If your institution will be providing partial support for the project (as many sponsors expect), the budget should reflect this fact.

Accurate estimates of all your expected costs are important. Reviewers know the cost of doing work in their field, and figures that are either too high or too low may cause them to question your familiarity with the field and your abilities as a project administrator. The sponsored programs office or the business office can help you compile realistic budget figures and should be consulted as you develop this section of the proposal.

Abstract: Prepare a brief abstract of the proposal, keeping in mind that reviewers may rely on it heavily in evaluating the proposed project. Be sure to cover all the key elements in the proposal but also to conform to any length limitations imposed by the sponsor. Although this section will appear first in the final document, it is best written after the main sections of the proposal have been completed.

Appendices: Any materials (such as charts, graphs, tables, or illustrations) that add important data but would impede a smooth reading of the narrative should be included as appendices. Concise vitae of project participants should also be included as appendices. Remember, however, that the sponsor is interested in relevant work and experience, not in everything that an individual has done.

General Considerations

As you write the full proposal, keep the following points in mind. First, be sure that you follow sponsor guidelines. By filling out forms incorrectly or failing to supply requested information, you may prejudice a potential sponsor against your project. Second, be sure to address stated criteria. If points are assigned to the various sections of a proposal (as program guidelines will indicate, if this is the case), one weak section may limit the chances of an otherwise strong proposal. Third, use clear, precise language aimed at your specific audience; avoid jargon or unnecessarily technical terminology. It is often helpful in writing the proposal to be familiar with the review procedures used by the particular sponsor, i.e., to know whether reviewers are informed laypersons or peers in a particular field.

Once the proposal has been completed, two additional steps need to be taken. Agency staff and foundation personnel commonly recommend that applicants have their proposals read by colleagues both for strength of logic and clarity of expression. (This often-neglected step can be very important in the proposal development process, as your colleagues' comments can help produce a stronger proposal.) The proposal should then be reviewed by the research or sponsored programs office staff, who can also help you follow the internal clearance or sign-off procedures required by your institution. Remember to allow enough time to secure all necessary approvals and signatures before the application deadline.

The final proposal document should be readable, neat, and easy to handle. You should avoid fancy covers or a slick appearance, but be sure that sections are easily identifiable and the table of contents is ac-

curate. Be sure that you have submitted the required number of copies, that the necessary signatures are in the correct places, and that you are submitting it to the correct office within the sponsor's deadline (when applicable).

Final Thoughts

Obviously, not every proposal written will be funded. If you are fortunate enough to succeed on your first attempt, notify the appropriate offices at your institution so that all administrative requirements can be met before you begin work. If the proposal is turned down, don't give up. Contact the sponsor and ask for reviewers comments as well as any suggestions they can offer for future improvements. Many successful proposals are the result of multiple revisions.

Your long-term effectiveness in securing external funding can be improved in a number of ways. Consider the following:

- Be creative in examining the applications of your work. If you are used to providing services in one institutional setting, think of others where your work might be appropriate. Manpower agencies, for example, may need the services of reading specialists.
- Become thoroughly familiar with the agencies that are apt to support your work. While the overall structures of federal and state governments may appear hopelessly complex, in all likelihood only a few agency subunits will offer significant support for any one field of activity. Zero in on those relevant to your interests. Get on their mailing lists for annual reports and other information. If they have advisory groups, monitor their deliberations.
- Review other work supported by potential sponsors. Look over copies of final project reports and previously funded proposals to see whether there are particular characteristics common to many of the projects funded in the past.
- Explore the possibility of establishing relationships other than that of grantor-grantee. Are there opportunities to serve summer residencies or sabbatical internships? Can students be placed in an agency on either a cooperative education or internship basis? Are there any services you could provide to agencies that might have a long-term interest in your work?

In all, the best advice we can give is not to wait until you desperately need grant support to begin using the resources readily available to you. Visit your sponsored programs office to discuss your potential for external support and the role it may play in your career. Let the professionals in that office know your interests and concerns and find out how they can assist you.

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Commerce Business Daily (CBD). Washington, DC: Government Printing Office. Daily listing of federal government solicitations for research, development, and training contracts. Monitored over time, provides a good *general* indicator of agency interests.

Federal Register. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office. Daily publication of notices of federal government rules and regulations and application deadlines for federal agency grant programs.

Resources for Identifying Potential Sponsors

Annual Register of Grants Support. Indianapolis: Marquis Academic Media. General information on federal programs and private foundation support. Listings by subject area, with useful indices. Published annually.

Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance (CFDA). Washington, DC: Government Printing Office. Describes federal programs, including purposes, eligibility, appropriations, and information contacts. Published annually.

Foundation Directory. New York, NY: The Foundation Center. Information on all foundations with assets

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Proposal Development

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The *Proposal Development Handbook* was prepared by Dean Kleinert and Libby Costello of AASCU's Office of Federal Programs (OFP).

OFP is a cooperative Washington information service available on a subscription basis to the research and sponsored programs offices at member institutions of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges. OFP provides a comprehensive package of information products, data-base services, and personalized technical assistance to enhance the sponsored programs activities at the four-year public colleges and universities that subscribe to its services.

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October 1987